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THE 'FORTY-NINERS; or, The Pioneer's Daughter.

By T. W. HANSHEW.



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THE 'FORTY-NINERS;

OR,

THE PIONEER'S DAUGHTER.

A TALE OF THE GREAT SIERRAS.

By T. W. HANSHEW.

CHAPTER I.

CLOUDS BEFORE THE STORM.

THE vivid, scarlet shafts of sunset were streaming down through the rugged peaks of the Sierra Nevadas, as a woman stood in the broad, open cleft of the Devil's Punch-Bowl and strained her sunken gray eyes across the vast expanse of jagged rock to where a solitary cabin perched upon the overhanging brow of the cliffs beyond.

She could not have been more than four and twenty years of age, but there was a strange, unhallowed shadow on her pale face that spoke of misery in the past, despair in the future and even aged her in appearance.

The tattered woolen shawl had fallen back from her head and the long, unkempt coils of reddish hair fell upon her shoulders in a rude, slovenly jumble.

Her dress was old and torn and the foot that beat upon the ground so idly as she gazed upward, peeped out in many places from its worn, rusty covering.

All day long she had been tramping across the mountains and now, as she paused in sight of the first habitation, the low, sweet notes of a girlish voice thrilling a song of praise to its Maker, swept out through the open windows and greeted her.

For a moment the wanderer seemed undecided, then she turned abruptly and began scrambling up the mountain pathway toward the cabin.

Once or twice she halted, as if half afraid to meet the singer, then with a sudden resolution she set her lips firmly together, strode up to the house and pushed open the door.

The song stopped on the instant, and the singer, who was knotting together bunches of the mountain flowers, came forward.

She was very pretty, and as she stepped into the sunlight, the warm glow fairly glittered in the coils of golden hair wound around her head.

The wanderer gazed at her without speaking for a moment, then she put her hands up to her face, and with a muttered: "God pity me!" turned and reeled away.

The girl in the cabin came forward and laid her hand upon the other's shoulder.

"What is the matter?" she said, gently. "Are you ill?"

"Don't touch me, miss," muttered the woman, drawing back; "don't touch me, I aren't fit for the likes of you to look at even. Please let me go!"

"There, don't talk so wildly; God made us both—we are equal in His eyes. Who and what are you?"

The ragged woman drew her shawl over her head, and turned her streaming eyes to the fair, sweet face above her.

"What I am you can guess," she muttered; "but who I am—don't ask me that, miss; I daren't tell you; indeed, I daren't. My name's Kate—that's all. The devil knows me if you don't."

"But have you no home?"

"Home! ha, ha, ha! Why, I aren't had sich a place these three years. Home! I only wish I had; somewhere out here where no one but the miners could see me. I almost fancy I could be happy then."

"But have you no relatives?" ventured the girl. "No father, mother, brothers—"

Kate sprang forward and clapped her dirty hand over the speaker's mouth.

"Don't say any more!" she cried. "Don't mention the word 'brother,' or I shall go mad. Even now I fancy mine follows me, and there is blood on him, miss—human blood. Please don't speak of it again, but give me a crust of bread; or maybe you've some work I can do just to keep me."

"Indeed I have. Papa is a widower—he's a minister, too, and I'm his only child. He made his fortune here in the mountains, and here he is likely to remain to the end of the chapter. My name is Margaret Gath; so, Kate, if you will come in, I am sure I can find work for you, for Hulda—she was our house-girl, you know—was married to one of the miners yesterday, and papa was going to Truckee to get a new one."

The wanderer did not fling herself at Margaret's feet, as one would suppose, but drew her rags about her, and followed her guide into the cabin.

Ambrose Gath had been born in the Sierras, and when the gold fever of 1849 swept over the country, he was one of the first to be enriched; so that now, independent as he was, it was not to be wondered at that the parsonage possessed more comfort than cabins in these wild old piles of rock were wont to have; indeed, it was one of those quiet, subdued pictures of domestic life that so readily win the heart of one sickened with the mazy labyrinths of society, or wrecked on the shoals of dearly-bought city experience.

And here it was the wanderer found the heart ease she coveted, and in three days she was so thoroughly at home that the miners already looked upon her as one whom they had known always, that is, the miners who visited the parsonage, for there were several of them not yet returned from Truckee, whither they had gone to purchase such implements as their calling deemed necessary.

And as for Margaret Gath, she soon learned that the miners called her "The Sunlight," and found the name by no means an inappropriate one.

On the fourth morning of her stay, just as the sun was arising over the distant hills, Joe Wiston, a hardy, good-natured fellow, who already cast "sheep's eyes" on Kate, called on his way to the diggings to report to the parson that the boys from Truckee would return that day.

"We miss Hawley, you know," he went on, "for in spite of all them ar quare ways of his'n, he's a rale good sort, parson."

"Who is this man of whom the miners speak so often?" queried Kate of Sunlight, when the men had left.

"Hawley Briggs is one of the strangest, oddest, best-hearted men at the peaks, and you will like him," was all the reply she gained, as Sunlight went on with her work, for this was Ambrose Gath's birthday, and they were preparing a breakfast for the miners in honor of the occasion.

At five o'clock a cheer announced the return of Hawley Briggs and his companions, and leaving Kate to go on with the meal, Sunlight darted from the cabin and ran down the canyon to the party there assembled.

"You see I am up with the sunlight," she said, when they had done with their rude greeting, "and as the men have returned from Truckee, waste no time, but hurry to the parsonage before the breakfast gets cold."

A cheer was the response to this, and turning, Margaret watched the men as they scrambled up the peaks and into the cabin.

"Go, kindly hearts," she murmured, "and may the blessings you so often heap on me, fall like rain upon him. Yes, Gaspard," she continued, watching absently down the Oakland stage road, "it is of you I think day and night, you, my lord and master—the father of my child."

At that moment a hand fell upon her shoulder, and a rough, yet kindly voice, interposed:

"Why do you speak to yourself, Sunlight, when there are others at hand?"

The girl turned with a start, and faced Hawley Briggs.

He was a good looking fellow, after the manner of miners, but there was a deep light in his eye as he gave utterance to those words that spoke as plainly as so many syllables could have done. "Talk to me, Sunlight; I love you, and will listen."

Half the men at the mines knew that this strange fellow loved the parson's daughter, but Margaret Gath was either blind to it, or affected to be.

"How you startled me," she said. "I thought you had gone in to breakfast."

"No," he returned, absently. "Thar, don't turn your eyes so longingly down the Oakland road, thar's no one to come up thar to-day save Gaspard Leroy, the mine-owner's son, or—I was going to say his whelp of a half-brother, Craven—but I've not seen him yet, and have only the miners' words to prove him as hard a master as they say. You can't be looking for either of them, miss, I'm sure."

At the mention of the man who, secretly, was her husband, a flush came over Margaret's face, but she quickly dispelled it and said, with a light laugh:

"Don't talk so solemnly. One would think you were a criminal, making his last speech before going to the scaffold."

"The scaffold!" gasped the man, his face growing deadly pale as he drew back. "Don't say that, miss, don't say that! It haunts me in my dreams by night, it glares at me from every lurking shadow by day. Oh, my God! will my heart never break, and end the story?"

"Hawley, are you ill?"

"I would to God I could die!" he muttered, seizing his pick and running up the mountain side. "Your path is all roses; mine, the dull and jagged ones of the mighty Sierras. The peaks, like fingers, beckon off, the sunlight mocks, the shadows madden. Good-bye!"

Then, with the last word still upon his lips, he darted into a clump of firs and disappeared, leaving the girl to greet her father, who even now was coming down the rocks.

In an instant her wonder at Hawley Briggs' strange words took flight, and running forward, she assisted the old man down the mountain side.

"You are not going away, papa?" she said.

"Yes, Meg; I must leave you to attend to the miners. There is sickness in Dresmer Gulch, and I am on my way to do all in my power to alleviate the sufferings of the unfortunate. Don't remain out long; a storm is brewing, and I shall not return till late."

He turned to leave, but impelled by some strange impulse, Meg flung her arms around his neck, and imprinted a kiss upon his lips.

A moment more and she was alone.

In after years she recalled the memory of that kiss, although she knew not then that it was the last link between happiness and the years of agony yet to come.

The rain began pattering down through the fir-crowned peaks of the Sierras, still she stood there gazing after the departing figure, unconscious that a man had come up the cleft, unconscious that his eyes

were fixed upon her with a baleful glare; till a clap of thunder startled her and she turned to come face to face with Craven Leroy, her husband's half brother.

"Oh, if I only dared to ask him of Gaspard," she muttered; "but he has bidden me be silent—be secret."

Then with a haughty bend of the head she swept by him and up toward the path.

"Let me assist you!" he cried, running forward, as a flash of lightning caused the girl to recoil.

"I can go alone!" she replied, icily, darting through the rain and trudging up the mountain side towards the parsonage.

He followed her with his eyes till the door closed upon her, then he drew back in the shadow of a boulder, and muttered:

"As proud as Lucifer! And she, with her brat, now stands in my path to fortune, for Gaspard had made me acquainted with his secret marriage. Madness! to be put aside at the caprice of a doting old man whose love for his elder son makes him unjust to his younger. The last mail brought news that my father was on the verge of the grave. Hump! He dead, Gaspard becomes a millionaire; but he in turn dead without issue, I possess all. Without issue," he went on, coldly; "and this mountain girl and her child come like shadows across my path. Hark! what noise was that?"

He sprang upon a rock as he spoke and peered down the cut.

"Speak of the devil he is sure to appear."

It was the Oakland stage bearing Gaspard to meet his wife.

"His wife! It must be my task to make her his widow or his mistress. The die is cast and I'll play the game to the bitter end but I'll win the stakes—Leroydale and its millions!"

CHAPTER II.

AN ECCENTRIC WILL.

As the stage coach turned the last curve of Sunlight Canyon, Gaspard Leroy sprang out and ran to meet his brother.

"Craven, my brother, waiting in the rain," he cried, grasping his hand and shaking it heartily. "You are more zealous than the miners who have already betaken themselves to shelter. The stage was delayed, else had I been here before to greet my dear wife."

Craven Leroy's brow darkened, and he blurted out, hotly:

"Gaspard, you astonish me. I must confess that were I you, with only one frail life between me and a fortune, it would be something more than a pretty face that would tempt me into the noose of matrimony."

"Shame on you, Craven!" cried Gaspard, piqued at this allusion to his wife. "Do you think—"

"Yes. Once our father dead—once you a millionaire, even Margaret Gath's beauty will pale upon you beside the courtly grace and elegance of the women of your new sphere. Again I say, once our father dead—"

"Shame on you, man! Have you no feeling?" returned Gaspard, huskily, at the same time placing an open letter in his brother's hand. "The early morning's mail brought me that. Read."

Craven Leroy drew the letter from the long, official envelope and glanced at the name upon the bottom of the sheet.

"Signed Jeremiah Dawson, my father's lawyer!" he gasped, turning deadly pale. "Then he is—"

"Dead!"

"Dead?"

"You know the worst. Read on."

Craven Leroy needed no second bidding; his eyes ran hungrily over the sheet, and his cadaverous face grew white and red by turns.

"Well?" asked Gaspard, when he saw he had finished.

"We are both lost. My father must have been mad when he made such a will. If you die without issue, legitimate or otherwise, and within three years, all the property reverts to me. But should you marry within the stated time, all goes to our cousin Franklin, and we are penniless."

"You know it all now," cried Gaspard. "I am here to renounce that fortune, and claiming my wife, take her to Oakland to our child."

To say that Craven Leroy was speechless, would be putting it mildly. This proposition took away his breath. He saw Leroydale through a golden mist slipping forever through his fingers, and lost eternally by this mad resolve of his brother's; and determined, be the cost what it might, he would not relinquish his dream of wealth without a struggle.

" You are wrong," he said.

" Wrong?"

" Yes, wrong."

" What other course is left open to me?"

" Flight and concealment."

" You say—" cried Gaspard, his breath coming with a struggle as this new era dawned upon him.

Craven Leroy saw that he had gained a point, and pressed it eagerly.

" Persuade the girl to fly with you, and at the expiration of three years wed her. The secret of your marriage is known only to ourselves; you can trust me to keep silent. It is not for my own interest I speak, Gaspard. I do not care for my father's wealth, but you, with a wife and child, I have no wish to see penniless while our worthless cousin rolls in luxury. Take my advice, see Meg, and at once; tarry no longer, for we shall soon be interrupted by the two men I see coming up the cut."

For a moment Gaspard Leroy was silent, then he shook Craven's hand, and said, as he darted up the rocks and across the little natural bridge through which the swollen torrent was dashing:

" Your words lend me new life. I will do it."

Then it was that Craven Leroy knew his scheme had proven successful, and as the door banged after his half-brother, he turned his attention to the new-comers.

" Liston Libbs," he muttered; " an idle fellow, a sluice robber, an unscrupulous scoundrel, but a man of all others I would meet."

Liston Libbs, or, as the miners called him, " Big Lib," was all that Craven Leroy had credited him with being, but as he came upon the broad plateau, he tipped his hat half respectfully, as though with fellow feeling, and motioned his companion forward.

" Poker, my pard, Mr. Leroy."

Craven did not deign to respond to the introduction, although Poker bowed very lowly and very humbly before him, but drawing back in the shadow of a bowlder, he motioned the two men to him.

" Lib," he said, " I've a bit of work for you to do. Something in your own line. Not hard, but well paid for."

" That's us, Poker, isn't it? We're worry anxious to make an honest livin', Mr. Leroy, but things hev come to sich a pass that the vigilantes string a feller up to the nearest tree just for the mere helpin' hisself to a ride on his neighbor's horse, or listin' a nugget from some one else's claim. It's hard, Mr. Craven; but Christianity don't obliterate the sentiment; and as fur me an' Poker here, we says, ' long live free law,' so we works on the plan that wot aren't ours we gits if we wants it. Aren't that fair now?"

Despite himself, Craven Leroy was forced to smile at the fellow's idea of fairness, but just at that moment he was working on the same principle himself, and the words struck home.

" Lib, are you afraid of blood?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

" Nary a skeer, sir. Is thar any in this?"

" Yes, and no. Come here."

From that out the conversation was carried on in a whisper, only the words " Sunlight " and " Gaspard," being distinctly heard.

In fifteen minutes the belt of gold dust, which previously had circled Craven Leroy's waist, had changed hands, and within five more, the rugged bowlders along the deep ravine sheltered the forms of Poker and Lib.

" The game is running smoothly now," muttered Craven, as he turned upon his heel and left Sunlight Canyon. " The stakes are almost in my own hands. I shall win—I shall win!"

Then the tall, fir-crowned peaks hid him from sight, and the rain went pelting down the gulch with a low, sullen roar that was at no variance with the strange conflict in his breast.

At that moment all Craven Leroy's future hung upon a thread. One false move, only one, and—it sickened him to think of it.

CHAPTER III.

ECHOES OF THE PAST.

WHEN Margaret Gath entered the parsonage, the miners were rapidly disposing of the birthday breakfast.

Joe Wiston looked up as she came toward them, and said:

" Whar's Hawley, Sunlight?"

" I don't know. Gone down the flats, I think. He seemed strangely sad and downcast, and would not come in."

" Gone down the flats?" repeated Joe. " P'raps he's too sick now.

Hawley an' me's ole pards, you know, an' it won't do fur me to be sittin' hyar enjoyin' all this yere blow-out ef he's ill; so you'll s'cuse me, Sunlight, ef I just moves on a bit an' tries to fin' out. Thar! don't disturb yourself, boys, I shan't be long."

Then, without another word, he pushed back his chair, arose from the table, and went out into the storm.

" Jewhillaker! rainin' like all tarnation!" he muttered, as he passed the cut and directed his footsteps towards Hawley Briggs' cabin. " Wonder wot's come over Briggs? Sick, or got them ar cussed 'memories,' as he calls 'em, on him again?"

He walked on for a few moments, then he sighted Hawley's cabin, and striding forward, pushed open the door and went in.

Briggs, who was sitting on a stool, with his face buried in his hands, looked up as he entered, and said, with a sad smile:

" Oh, it's you, Joe, is it?"

" Yes, it's me, an' wetter'n a drownded rat. What's come over you, Hawley? Got them ar memories on again? See here, you promised onct to tell me the hull truth about them."

" I know it, Joe," returned Hawley, as he pushed back the long hair that fell upon his shoulders, " and to-day the past has, by a single word, been recalled so plainly to me, that I can find no better time to lay bare the secret of my wretched past before you. Joe, I aren't Hawley Briggs."

Wiston looked at him as though he fancied he had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

" Go way!" he cried. " See here, pard, you can't play it on me like that! I did onct read in one of them ar yaller-kivered novels that a Yorker brought into camp summat about two fellers lookin' so much alike that you couldn't tell which was the other one, but yer can't fool me! I know yer the same Hawley Briggs as went away with the boys to Truckee."

" I don't mean that, Joe," Hawley went on. " I mean that Hawley Briggs isn't my name."

" Sho! what is it?"

" Richard Delmayne."

" Well, warn't that good enough for yer?"

" Yes, much too good," was the husky response, " to be worn by the shattered wreck I now am. Joe, I was not always the sullen, moody chap you find me to-day. I was once gay and happy. I had a sister pure as the snow, but alas! like that, she fell before the wily tongue and false promises of a villain."

" Then what did you do?" queried Wiston, gnawing his lips savagely.

" Do?" repeated Delmayne—" do? I struck the false wretch dead at my feet, and fled here to seek a hiding-place from justice and revenge! I never saw my sister again; I never heard the end of the tragedy, but a cloud had dimmed the young morning of my joy, and from that hour I became what you see me to-day—a miserable, heart-broken man."

He head sank between his palms once more, and Joe could hear the surf-beat of his sobs, and see the tears that trickled from between his toil-hardened fingers.

It was a moment too solemn, a memory too ghastly to break in upon, and without a word he arose and quitted the cabin.

He felt that Delmayne was beyond the reach of consolation, even lost in the blinding maze of the past, against whose golden disc the present loomed up, gaunt and ghostly, and the future cast a shadow, felt, but all the while unseen.

CHAPTER IV.

FACE TO FACE.

CRAVEN LEROY had no intention of quitting Sunlight Canyon when he left Big Lib and Poker; on the contrary, he meant to be an eye witness if not an actual participant in the carrying out of his villainous scheme, and accordingly, halted after going a few yards down the cut, and, retracing his footsteps, took his position behind a huge, frowning bowlder that overlooked the Devil's Punch-Bowl, and was but a few feet removed from the terminus of the little natural bridge, opposite the hiding-place of the sluice robbers.

He knew that Gaspard was already placing the projected plan before Sunlight, and that at some stage of the affair the girl would put in an appearance—perhaps alone—then it would be an easy matter for his villainous hirelings, by one rough push, to hurl her to certain

death upon the sharp, jagged rocks of the ravine, hundreds of feet below, removing her forever from his path, and opening out a new vista to Leroydale and the mines of the Sierras.

Such a thought as the interference of Providence never once entered his mind. He looked upon that as an idle tale gotten up to frighten children; but he was destined to find it a stern reality.

An hour dragged by—slowly enough for the watchers—then a noise startled him and he saw the door of the parsonage open softly and Margaret, pale as ashes, came down the pathway followed by Gaspard.

There was an earnest look on the man's face, and Craven Leroy knew that he was finding it a sharp battle to persuade the girl to fly without divulging her secret, and he looked upon as one lost to virtue and honor.

Despite the rain, Margaret was hatless; her mental agony made her oblivious to personal comfort.

They halted just below the bridge and stood for a moment in silence.

"Well?" queried Gaspard, folding his arms and looking his wife squarely in the eyes. "You are silent. Shortly the return stage will pass yonder through the cleft on its way to Oakland. Shall I return alone and deaden my heart to the knowledge that I have a wife who returns not my pure devotion? Answer me, Margaret."

The girl lifted her white anguished face up to his.

"Gaspard, this is too much," she sobbed. "It is cruel to ask me to fly and leave my poor father to mourn me as lost, when but one word would spare him all, and that word—"

"I forbid you to speak!" he returned, coldly. "Look yonder, where the clouds drift towards Filmer's Peak; in one moment they will surround it. I give you till then to choose. Life with me in the halls of Leroydale, or life with the miners lit up only by the golden shaft of sunlight and embittered by eternal separation. Hark! Already the stage rumbles up the cleft. Quick! Speak!"

"Mercy, mercy, Gaspard!"

"The clouds are on the peak. Choose; me or desertion!"

It was too much.

For an instant the slender form quivered, the deep blue eyes expanded with horror, and then she fell forward into his arms, and murmured:

"You!"

He strained her to his heart and showered kisses upon the white, upturned face, all unaware that from the fringe of fir trees beyond the flats, the ashen, haggard face of Richard Delmayne peered down upon them.

"She is lost!" came huskily through the bloodless lips; "lost like Kate, before the honeyed words of a villain!"

Untwining Margaret's arms from his neck, Gaspard moved toward the parsonage.

"Where—where are you going?" she faltered.

"To get your hat, dearest; remain here, I will soon return."

Then the door closed softly upon him, and she was alone.

Alone! Then all the bitterness of her situation came over her.

She took a step forward, tottered, murmured Gaspard, and then, with a low cry, half sob, half groan, sank fainting upon the rocks.

This was the moment for Craven Leroy.

Springing from behind the boulder, he beckoned on Big Lib and Poker.

"Toss that girl down the canyon," he whispered.

The two wretches had stooped to seize their victim, when with a single bound, Richard Delmayne leaped the narrow chasm, and felled them to the earth.

Another moment and his fingers were at Craven Leroy's throat.

This might have been the wretched man's end had it not been that Gaspard Leroy came forth from the parsonage at that moment, and, pushing Richard toward him, Craven shouted:

"That man would abduct Meg."

Delmayne sprang toward him again as the last words passed his lips, but he halted suddenly and fell in his tracks, for a stone, propelled with unerring aim by Gaspard Leroy, struck him fully upon the head.

Up the cleft dashed the Oakland stage, and, lifting the senseless girl in his arms, Gaspard darted down the road, sprang in and was rattled away at all speed.

Craven was upon the point of following, when Richard Delmayne sprang to his feet and threw himself upon him.

This unexpected onslaught disturbed Craven's balance, and, in the struggle to regain it, his hat fell off and the two men were face to face.

"My God, you living, John Ashton!" shrieked Richard; you, the betrayer of my sister, the wrecker of my life! Villain!"

He had raised his clenched hand to bring it down upon the other's face, when a shriek startled him, and he turned to see the wanderer, Kate, standing in the doorway of the parsonage.

"Richard—brother!" she cried.

"Kate—sister!" came back the husky response.

Then with giant force he hurled Craven Leroy in a jumbled heap at his feet, and wailed as he turned away:

"Go, coward; I give you your life—mine is broken forever!"

CHAPTER V.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF DARKER MYSTERIES.

OVERPOWERED by his emotions as he uttered those words, Richard Delmayne covered his face with his hands, and reeling across the little natural bridge, sank down upon the rocks with a groan.

True, a great load had been lifted from his heart—he knew now he was not a murderer—but the knowledge that his erring sister still lived, crushed him beneath its weight.

"Oh, my God!" he moaned, "take me away from this spot—honor, Margaret, happiness—all gone, and by this villain's power! I wish I could die!"

The rough, red hands dropped down from his tear-wet cheeks, and his eye swept over the spot where the lost sister had appeared.

But the door was closed—Kate Delmayne was gone—and glancing in the direction of the little natural bridge he saw that Craven Leroy had also disappeared.

A deep devil-light sprang up in his eye, and scrambling to his feet he ran up the peaks and peered after the Oakland stage, now rapidly disappearing in the distance.

"Oh, Margaret! Margaret! Are you, then, lost forever?" he cried. "She is there—the villain, Leroy, is bearing her away, while I stand calmly by and watch it! Good God! she knows not the fate of Kate, the original of the one in store for her! No, no! I must reach her and warn her before it is too late!"

And dashing aside his pick, hatless though he was, he darted down the gulch and sprang into the road in time to see the stage pass out of sight across the distant flats.

He heeded not the rain, the forked flashes of lightning, nor the dull rumble of the thunder; but sped on and on with but one thought in his mind—to save the woman he loved from shame and dishonor.

Gradually the air grew darker. Dense clouds now piled in tumbled heaps across the sky; still—still he ran on, never looking at the ground over which he was flying, but keeping his bloodshot eyes fixed on the distant hills above which he knew the coach must soon appear.

The moments flew by with frightful rapidity, but the stage had not as yet come in sight.

"What if they had turned down another cut and doubled on me?" he wailed. "What if—"

The words were broken off short and swelled into a loud huzza, as, against the dark background of clouds, the stage swept into view on the crest of the far-off hills.

"Thank God—thank God!" he shrieked, and then leaped blindly forward, never noting where he went.

There was a crash, a heavy rumble, a muffled shriek of dismay, and then—silence.

In his blind haste the wretched man leaped fairly into the yawning jaws of a deserted shaft, and went circling heels over head through space until he struck the hard earth beneath, where he lay in a pool of water, senseless and bleeding, while the stage went sweeping on, and the space between himself and Margaret Gath widened with every second.

When consciousness returned to Richard Delmayne the rain was beating furiously down in his face, and peering up the shaft, he saw that night had fallen, and darkness reigned everywhere.

"Night!" he gasped—"night! and she left in the morning. Oh,

my God! all those intervening hours they have been flying from me, and now where to find her, Heaven alone can tell me. Oh, Margaret—Margaret! what shall I say to your father?"

He moved nearer to the shaft as he spoke, and brushing back the blood-stained locks of hair clinging around his face, he seized the "hoist," and began dragging himself to the surface.

Faint as he was from loss of blood, this was no easy task; but there was an iron constitution, an indomitable will to back him up in his endeavor, and at length he stood in the free air again, shivering like a leaf in the storm.

All his after life was shadowed by that fatal hour, and as he tottered down the cleft towards the parsonage, he muttered to himself:

"June the fifth, eighteen hundred and fifty-three—I shall never—never forget this night!"

All heedless of the rain beating down upon his white face—ghastly pale against the blood-stained locks upon his brow—he reeled down upon the road.

As he reached Sunlight Canyon, he peered up at the little parsonage perched upon the rocks so high above him, and saw the lights flashing to and fro in a hurried manner which told him something wrong had happened.

"Have they discovered Margaret's flight?" he muttered, as he began toiling up the steep ascent. "Oh, my God! that the same man should blight the lives of the two women in this world who are dear to me. Ah! Lester Creswick, even though your past is shadowed beneath your true name of Craven Leroy, you shall not escape my vengeance, or the expose of your fiendish nature!"

CHAPTER VI.

HOW THE NIGHT FELL.

AND now let us take a backward glance and see how affairs progressed at the parsonage.

Kate Delmayne had not seen the flight of Sunlight—she was gone when the wanderer appeared on the threshold—and the moment Richard, enfeebled by his emotions, sank down upon the rocks, she closed the door hurriedly and ran up to her own chamber.

White and dizzy, she flung herself down upon her couch and locked her tremulous fingers over her eyes, as if to shut out the memory of the scene just past.

"Father in Heaven!" she moaned, rocking to and fro in her agony; "'tis thus the morning breaks; how will the night fall?"

How will the night fall? Alas, in bitterness and tears; breaking like a surf-boat upon the hearts of iron and dragging down into the gulf of despair the shattered wrecks of two men's lives.

She could hear the comments of the miners below upon the absence of herself and Meg—she could hear the jar of their boisterous laughter and then—she heard them quit the house and she was alone once more with those frightful echoes of the past and gaunt, shadowy specters of the near future.

The hours of daylight waned, darkness came on and quitting her chamber, she went slowly down the stairs to the room where the miners had been eating.

There were a few logs smoldering in the broad fire-place, for, despite the presence of early summer, the air was still raw among the mountain peaks, and lighting a candle, she stood it upon the mantel and removed the remains of the meal.

Through the broad window near the old fire-place she could see the storm pelting down like mad, but turning away with a shiver she sat down by the table.

"What a fearful night it is," she mused. "The wind sighs through the pines, and the swollen stream roars in its tumultuous course down the ragged gulch. Ugh! The sinfulness, the shame of my life began in storm—is it fated so to close? What mad freak drifted me into the path of Margaret Gath? and oh, Heaven, what wild, unforeseen horror conjured up these terrible phantoms of the past?"

"In the heart of the great Sierras, I fancied myself free; but he is here, and Richard, too. Richard! Powers of mercy! if the good impulse which made him spare Lester Creswick's life this morning, should pass away, and— Ugh! I shudder to think of it."

She paused, for she fancied just then she heard the trample of feet, but at that moment the tall, old-fashioned clock pealed forth the hour of nine, and the sound was lost.

"Nine o'clock," she went on, "and still Meg and her father are

absent. Hark! I am sure I heard footsteps. Perhaps Mr. Gath is returning; I'll look for him."

She sprang from her seat as she spoke, and ran toward the door, but scarce had she reached it ere it was pulled open, and Joe Wiston strode across the threshold.

"Oh, Joe, how you frightened me!" she cried, turning back towards the table to hide her flushed face.

"Did I?" was the laughing response, as the tough old 'forty-niner flung off his soaking coat, and shook himself before the fire. "Wall, didn't mean ter, Miss Kate. Br-brow! it's an al-fired bad night, aren't it? Whar's the parson?"

"He left for Dresmer Gulch early this morning."

"That's bad now, aren't it? I saay! have any er ther boyees shown up yet?"

"No," she said, with evident surprise. "Are they coming up again?"

"Yes; to present the parson with a Bible an' hev a jolly good blow out. Sorter s'prise party, yer know. Now I've told yer all about it, yer kin git ther place all right, an' I'll jist heave back down the gulch an' wake up the lads. You jist leave the candle in the windy, thar! Whar's my coat? Oh! all right! I'm off!"

She dropped wearily back into her seat beside the table as he left, and lowered her head till it rested on her locked hands upon the edge of the board.

Meanwhile, Joe went darting by the window at all speed, but scarcely had taken the first step down the gulch ere he struck against the muffled figure of a man who was coming up to the plateau.

"Axes yer parding, sir," he cried, as he stepped aside, but the man made no reply as he went past.

"Tain't wery perlite our friend is," muttered Wiston, turning and watching the direction in which the stranger went. "Wonder who he is an' whar he's goin' ter? Phew!" he went on, as the new-comer opened the door of the parsonage, and without ceremony, stalked in. "Gone in, as I live. Thar's summat up, an' I'm goin' to larn wot."

Drawing his coat closer about him, he darted rapidly back to the house, and just as the new-comer entered the door, he lifted the window cautiously and blew out the light.

In the faltering flicker of the fire, he saw the stranger remove his hat, and recognized—Craven Leroy.

"What the dickens does he want here?" muttered Joe, slinking down below the window, and placing his ear to the crack, where he could hear all.

For a moment Craven Leroy glanced suspiciously around, then he strode forward and laid his hand on Kate's shoulder.

The woman sprang up in surprise, and as her eyes met his, she drew back with a little shriek of terror, and gasped:

"Lester Creswick! You!"

"Hush!" he whispered, a tinge of fear sweeping over his cadaverous face. "Hush! not that name now."

"It was false, then, like the man who bore it!" ventured Kate, her lips curling scornfully.

The ears at the window pricked up to catch Leroy's reply, but he merely shrugged his shoulders, and said, half mockingly:

"You are quite an actress, Miss Delmayne, but your art is thrown away on me. You and I know one another—"

"Too long and too well!" broke in the woman, hotly. "Who placed the brand of infamy on my name? Who lured me from my home, till the innocent girl was lost in the hard, worldly woman? Who wrecked my life? Who made me what I am to-night—a creature to be pitied—a Magdalen? Who? Why, you, Lester Creswick, and you have the audacity to enter this house, and tell me 'we know one another.'"

"Woman!" he hissed, lifting his clenched hand above her.

"No, devil!" was the fierce rejoinder, "and that's just what you have made me. Have you ever seen a child building itself a house of cards, tremble as it places one upon the other till the weight is too great for the foundation, and it falls in ruins? My life is a house of cards. One by one you have built them up till the frail support will bear no more. You and I are done forever, Lester Creswick; there is the door. Go!"

This was too much for honest Joe Wiston, and flinging up the window, he leaped into the room, and shouted:

"Hull on a minute, Miss Kate, just let me kick him out. I war thar by the windy and hearn it all. So our friend, Craven Leroy,

used to go 'round under other names, did he? Well, I swar he won't do it agin!"

And with these words, Joe began flinging off his coat and rolling up the sleeves of his hickory shirt. Craven Leroy saw what was coming, and snatching up his hat, like the coward he was, he fled through the door, and disappeared in the storm.

Kate flung herself down by the table and wept like a child.

"So you're Kate Delmayne, Hawley's sister, be yer?" said Joe, as soon as they were alone. "Well, look a here, Kate, I likes Hawley, an' I loves you; can't yer take in a partner now?"

Kate rose from the table and came forward to him, laying her hand upon his shoulder and looking squarely in his face.

"Joe," she said, "you are too honorable to link with such as me, although I would make you a true wife; but until the stain is taken from my name—and Heaven only knows how it can be done, I shall never marry. I aren't fit for the likes of you, rough as you are with honest toil, to call wife. I remember once my mother said to me: 'We know not what an hour may bring forth,' and so, Joe, when I aren't the infamous creature the world and society calls me, I'll be your wife."

"Sercity!" blurted out Joe, "serci'ty! what's serci'ty but a canker in satins? I know I aren't got no eddication, I aren't like the lovers in that ere yaller kivered novel as I read, but I loves yer, Kate, an' I'll go through fire an' water but wot I'll win yer yet."

There was a ring of truth, an air of honest nobility about the sturdy old 'forty-niner as he uttered those words, and doubtless Kate Delmayne would have replied to them, thanked him, but at that moment a voice was heard away down the gulch, shouting lustily:

"Joe, oh, Joe, give us a light!"

Wiston sprang forward, seized the candle, and lit it at the fire.

"It's them 'ere boyees comin' up with ther Bible an' ther grub. Hull on a minnit, lads," he shouted, holding the light in the window. "Thar! Now the cut is as plain as day, an' up yer come, my bloomers!"

The cheers of the miners are heard as they come up the gulch, then they are seen to pass the window, and Joe knows his task is done—they are here—and flinging aside his coat and hat, he greets them as they enter, with those rough words of cheery welcome born in the son of the soil.

Matt Mathers, or, as the miners called him, Matt o' the Mountains, because he was born there—was one of the first to enter. He bore the Bible, and setting it on the mantel, he directed the others to empty the bags of food they carried, upon the table, and this was speedily done in a manner which put despair in the tidy spirit of Kate.

"Whar's the parson?" he queried, as soon as this was done.

"Out," was Kate's reply.

"Phew! and Sunlight?"

"She's out, too."

"Out on a night like this in the mountains! Is the gal mad? Gone with the parson p'raps?"

"No. He left an hour before she did."

"That's odd," and Matt o' the Mountains scratched his head, meditatively. After another moment, however, he burst forth suddenly with: "See here, boyees, the parson's out, Sunlight's out, an' we're the only ones to hum. Now we came here to hev a s'prise party, an' as there ain't anybuddy to hev it with, I votes we has it with ourselves. I'm hungry!"

"An' I—an' I!" chorused the miners, lustily, and each and every one voted Matt Mathers the best man in the Sierras, or, at least, the most thoughtful one.

In a very few minutes the whole party were busily engaged in demolishing the supper brought up as a surprise to Ambrose Gath, and happy as lords, till a sudden cry from Joe Wiston acquainted them with the fact that a certain something which was of vast importance to them was missing, and that something was—whisky!

At the bare mention of the word, every man awoke to the fact that he was extremely thirsty, and loud and long were the shouts for the missing article.

"Come—come, now, don't keep her back. Whar is the bottle?" shouted Joe.

"By jingo!" cried Matt, "we gave it to that heathen Chinee, Wun Lung, to bring up. Saay, boyees, jist pile out arter that—"

The words were cut short by a terrible war whoop, one that would

have been no disgrace to a red Indian, as the Chinaman in question, disgustingly drunk, reeled across the threshold.

By some means he had obtained a battered tall hat, and this perching upon his shiny pate gave him a most ludicrous expression.

The miners did not stand upon ceremony, but rushed bodily upon poor Wun Lung, and fairly turned him inside out in their search for the missing bottle.

"Whar's that whisky?"

"Fork her out, you slit-eyed heathen."

"Whar's the whisky?" repeated Joe. "Speak! whar is it?"

Wun Lung rolled his eyes heavenward and said, as he rubbed the pit of his stomach gently:

"Alle gonee!"

"What?" and before the Chinaman fairly understood what had happened, they had wiped up the floor with him and bowled him down the ravine like a fifty-pounder.

It was a bitter blow, for it was the last drop of whisky in camp, and none nearer than Truckee, a three days' tramp across the mountains.

Gathering the boys around him, Joe Wiston, sadder perhaps than he had ever been before in the whole course of his life, put the question:

"What are we goin' to do?"

"How foolish," laughed Kate, lifting a jug that stood by the window. "Do? Why, drink water!"

If ever Kate Delmayne had cause to thank Heaven that she had been born a female, that was the hour, for at the bare mention of the word, every man's hand sought his revolver, as if to shoot her on the spot for the deadly insult.

"Look here," says Matt, "I likes you, I does, but if you have any value for your life, miss, don't offer to introduce us to such a stranger. Water!"

"Ugh!" and a shiver of disgust went through the whole party, as they took their places at the table and went on with the meal.

In the midst of this, the parson, wet to the skin, pushed open the door and came in.

Of course there was plenty of speech making before the Bible was presented, and in their happiness the miners almost forgot the treachery of the Chinaman.

Ambrose Gath was deeply grateful for their kindness, and bade them make merry while they could.

"Where is Meg, Kate?" he asked, as he stood before the fire, enveloped in a cloud of steam issuing from his soaked garments.

"She went out just after you did, sir, and has not since returned."

The parson's face grew deadly pale in an instant, for he knew well the perilous nature of the country.

"Out—out!" he gasped, as if unable to believe the words. "Oh, mercy for my child, Heaven, mercy! She may have fallen down the pass and been dashed to pieces on the rocks below; she may have—oh, let me not think of that! Quick! Give me the lantern, Kate, I must find her!"

"Hull on a minnit!" cried Joe, springing up from the table; "I'm with yer, parson!"

"So am I—and I!" was the answer of his mates, as they followed his example.

"Quick, then!" cried Gath, snatching the lantern, and darting to the door. "Oh, Margaret, my child, my child!"

With the cry still upon his lips he darted towards the door, but it was flung quickly open, and a figure strode forward to meet them.

It was Half-Witted Ike, a poor fool of a miner, pale and trembling.

"Parson—parson!" he cried. "Oh, how can I tell you?"

Those words revealed to Ambrose Gath the fact that something terrible had happened, and clapping his hand on Ike's shoulder, he gasped hoarsely:

"Speak! For Heaven's sake, man, speak!"

"Where is Sunlight?"

"She is out; we are just seeking her. Go on."

"Go no further. I was coming up the cleft by the brink of the land slide, just near the stage route, and on the very edge of the chasm I found this."

Then from beneath his coat he took something made up of flowers and bright-colored ribbons, all wet with rain, and handed it to the parson.

He snatched it with a shriek of horror, a film gathered before his eyes, and, as he reeled back, he gasped:

"My daughter's hat!"

A thrill of horror went through the whole assemblage, and in a quivering voice, Ike rejoined:

"The ground was torn up as though from a struggle, and bore the print of men's feet. Still further on, just by the deserted shaft, I—I found—blood!"

With a shriek of horror, Ambrose Gath seized Joe Wiston's arm, and cried:

"To arms, lads! We must find the body and track the assassins. Come—come!"

And thus it was the night fell.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MINER'S OATH.

WHEN blinded, appalled with terror, we do not think of worse in this world. And so it was with Ambrose Gath; the present horror was upon him, it seemed impossible to hear of a greater one, but this was still in store for him, for as they darted towards the door again, a figure appeared at the window, pale and bleeding, and uttered but one word:

"Stay!"

It was Richard Delmayne, who had just reached the parsonage after escaping from the mine shaft.

In the canyon below he had wondered at the flashing lights, and reached the window just in time to hear Gath's last words.

He knew then that Sunlight's absence was known, saw that they thought her dead, and inwardly groaned at the fatal news he bore which he knew would be worse to her father's heart than positive knowledge that her mangled body lay at the bottom of the landslide, as food for the beasts and birds.

Pushing open the door, he staggered in.

Only for a moment was the place he had left vacant, then the sinister face of Craven Leroy appeared there, and his ears drank in every word of that bitter meeting.

For a moment Ambrose Gath and Delmayne stare at each other as if fearful of speaking, then Richard whispered hoarsely:

"Parson, you are seeking Meg?"

"Yes—her body."

"Her body!"

"She is dead!"

"Would to God she were!" murmured Delmayne.

A white, stony pallor overspread the old man's face, and he drew his bent form up to its fullest height, as if to prepare for the blow he felt coming now for the first time.

"She—she is not dead?" he faltered.

Demayne shook his head.

"No."

"Oh, then, Briggs, speak, for Heaven's sake! Meg, my child, she is—"

"Lost to you forever. She has flown with Gaspard Leroy; she is dishonored!"

He saw that the old man was falling, and springing forward, Richard wound his arm around him and stayed him, while he went on with his story.

"I saw it all, sir; heard him beg her to fly with him, saw her fall into his arms, and knew that she was lost forever. But, oh, sir, think not that I stood calmly by; I would have died for her sake, but—but—"

He faltered; he could not betray Craven Leroy without exposing his sister's shame.

"Go on—go on!" feebly cried the old man.

"Well, sir, I chased the stage—it was in the morning they fled—but evil chance caused me to fall headlong down the deserted shaft, and I must have been stunned, for I remember no more till an hour ago."

"Go on—go on!" repeated the old man, his words coming mechanically, and his heart, once crushed, eager to hear the tale to the end.

Richard Delmayne drew back, sadly.

"There is no more to tell!"

"No more?" repeated Gath; "no more?"

"Nothing."

"It is false!"

The words rang harshly on the air, and as the miners turned, Craven Leroy came into the room.

Delmayne turned deadly pale, and fastening his eye upon Craven, he said:

"Inhuman monster, in this dread hour do you still indulge in thoughts of bitter hatred?"

A smile glided over the face of Leroy, and moving toward the parson, who, at his words, had shrank back from Delmayne's side and huddled down among the miners, whose blazing eyes were fixed on Richard, he said:

"Mr. Gath, in all that fellow's story, there is but one truth. Your daughter has been abducted. I saw it done, and he who brings you news of the deed, Hawley Briggs, planned and carried it out himself."

This was too much for the miners. All the while his words had been firing their blood, and now, as the last words passed his lips, they sprang toward Richard Delmayne, shouting:

"Hang him—hang him!"

Quick as a flash Joe Wiston seized a chair, leaped before Delmayne, and swung it over his head.

"Back—back, all of you!" he shouted. "You're not going to string up a pard of mine in that style while I can face the moosic! I'd believe Hawley Briggs before all the rich men's sons as ever set foot on the Sierras, and I tell you, our pard has told the truth, and that man thar, Craven Leroy, is a liar!"

Overpowered by emotion, Delmayne laid his hand on Joe's shoulder and said:

"God bless you, lad! I may be years in accomplishing the task I am now about to set myself, but here, in the presence of all, I swear I will seek for Margaret Gath, and I will find her if she be hidden at the world's end!"

"Thar!" cried Joe, triumphantly. "What air yer got ter say ter that, Mr. Leroy?"

"That the man is a foul liar, and as I hope for mercy, I and I alone have spoken the truth."

"Liar in your teeth!" hissed Delmayne, rushing upon him and flinging him to the ground. "God pity you, Lester Creswick, when we meet on even terms, and may He have mercy enough to point out the path which shall fulfill the miner's oath."

"Hour by hour I will track them, step by step I will hunt them, until the stain is taken from my name, and Margaret Gath is once more in her father's arms!"

Then he passed out of the door and was lost in the darkness. That night, Craven Leroy, Poker, and Big Lib shook the dust of the Sierras from their feet, and went no one knew where.

Time dragged on—a year had swept by; another, and then another followed.

Three years had passed, and still no news of Richard Delmayne or the pioneer's daughter.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE GATES OF LEROYDALE.

To the hearts of those in the Sierras those three years dragged by wearily enough, and at length, wearied, heart-broken and despondent, Ambrose Gath forsook the little parsonage on the cliffs, gave up his self-imposed task of preaching, and built himself a home deep down in the gully, far away from the scene of his past bitterness, in the Silver Sand Ravine.

This was one of the loveliest spots in the whole Sierra chain.

The tall, purple peaks towered up like shafts, for above the dell beneath, where the bright, glittering sand reflected the glory of the sun, and the cascade beyond fell with a murmur of delight across the jagged rocks and hurried away down the gully below.

Kate Delmayne never forsook him, never left his side; and soon all the love that had once been Margaret Gath's became that of the wanderer, only that the void in the heart was still there, and it soon became evident to those who knew him that the parson was slowly—very slowly, but still surely—sinking into his grave.

When the nights were brilliant with moonlight, he would sit in the open door of his cabin, gaze up at the towering masses of rock, and, with his faltering, failing voice, call softly:

"Margaret—Margaret!"

But the only answer was the mocking echo of his own words as they died out among the peaks.

Each week when the mail-coach came up from Oakland, he would go out all radiant with smiles, saying to himself: "Meg has written to me at last," but the answer he received was always the same: "Nothing!"

Nothing—not a line from Sunlight, not a line from Richard Delmayne.

Day after day—day after day, for three long, weary years this went on—always that hope for remembrance, and again always that bitter disappointment.

Kate had imparted to him the story of her own broken life, and when he knew that it was with the brother of the man who shattered her happiness that Margaret had flown, he felt that there was little left to live for.

"Oh, she is lost to me forever, Kate!" he would say, "but if she would only come back to me—even with the taint of disgrace upon her name—we would go far—far away from here and be happy where no one knew her secret. Oh, Margaret—Margaret! save me from my grave! Come back—come back!"

"Bear up," the blighted woman would reply; "it is Heaven that burdens you—relief is at hand. Watch—wait—pray!"

They could understand the silence of Margaret—that was shame—but of Richard Delmayne, the man who had gone in search of her. Ah! that was an enigma, and in order to solve it we must beg the reader's permission to turn back to the night of his departure, and follow us as we trace him.

That fatal June night was dark and stormy, and as he passed up on the rocky mountain side, the man's mind was pregnant with thoughts of horror.

"What if he should not find the girl? or, finding her, should see her so wedded to her life of shame that she would refuse to accompany him back to her aged father?"

Ugh! the thought made him shudder.

He wandered on in the darkness all night, and the following day, just as he turned past the forks of Eldoranda, the stage came rumbling up the cut.

It was not the one in which Margaret had been carried off, and Delmayne knew that to question this driver as to the whereabouts of the girl would be folly.

He had a quantity of gold dust upon his person, and with this he paid his fare and took his seat in the stage determined to watch for the return one, spring out and question the driver regarding the place where Leroy and Sunlight left.

But worn out as he was, his head drooped, he slept, and when he awoke it was only to learn from the driver that the return stage had passed hours ago.

Crushed at this intelligence, he flung himself back into the seat and spoke no more.

In due time the stage reached Oakland, and Richard found himself alone in the city, making the proverbial search for the needle in the haystack.

Up and down the streets he wandered, passing up the carriage roads where the giant oaks grew and on into the city beyond, but no sign of Meg or of Gaspard Leroy.

Thus a week went past, and one afternoon, while standing in a crowd, he heard a man cry out:

"I have been robbed!"

"Of what?" asked one of the vigilantes, coming up.

"A gold watch! Search every man!"

Delmayne demurred at this, whereupon the man fixed his greedy gray eyes upon him, and said something about "people who shout aloud their innocence being often guilty."

Red and flushed, Richard turned away, but had not gone more than a yard when the crowd gathered around him and loud demands were made upon him to empty his pockets.

"Never!" he cried. "I'm an honest man, pard, and I won't be insulted like that! But, if any one present thinks he can force me to do it, I'm his man at once!"

And as he spoke, he began turning up his cuffs.

This was enough; a motion from the vigilantes, he was seized upon all sides and searched at once.

Almost the first article discovered upon his person was the very gold watch.

Delmayne turned pale as ashes.

"Good God! how came it there?" he cried. "Gentlemen, I swear to you I am innocent of its theft. It is all a mistake!"

"Of course it is," sneered the watch owner, sneaking out of the crowd and hastening around the corner, where he was presently met by Craven Leroy.

In vain Delmayne tried to argue with the crowd that he was innocent; they laughed him to scorn, and not a few were in favor of hanging him to the nearest tree.

However, this did not carry the day, but he was not allowed to go free.

He was dragged up before a justice—heaven save the mark! and consigned to "Fleece," by which singular name was meant a sort of penitentiary, for three years. This was law in California at that period.

We will not weary the reader with a detailed history of the abuse and misery he experienced in that place; suffice it that he served out every hour of his sentence, and one morning he found himself standing alone in the streets, penniless and hungry.

And Margaret. What of her?

Was she dead?

Over and over again he asked himself that question, but could find no answer.

Now came the rub.

How to leave Oakland in search of her and where to go.

Not a copper, not a grain of dust did he have—nothing but a little locket containing his mother's face, and he could not part with that.

"I ought to write to the parson or to Kate, if either be living," he said, "but I have no money to buy materials or to send it if written."

So he wandered about the streets, looking for work enough to buy a crust of bread, but he got none, and began to think he would have to part with the locket.

"I'll go another day," he muttered. "Perhaps to-morrow I may find work, for I cannot beg."

Then he strolled out upon the road near the great oaks of Oakland, and watched the carriages hurrying past filled with pretty women and wealthy men, laughing, all, as they swept by him, penniless and hungry.

Up the broad avenue came a pair of prancing bays, and lying back in the cushions with a sunny-haired little girl by her side, was a woman, pale and careworn, yet still wondrously beautiful.

The miner came to a halt with a gasp; on rolled the carriage, and reeling back against one of the oaks, Richard Delmayne, white, shivering, horrified, moaned:

"Found, but oh, my God, that child!"

Yes, found at last; it was indeed Sunlight. But oh, how sadly changed!

The joyous, happy look had forever flown from her face, and there was penciled there misery and despair instead.

All she had given up for Gaspard Leroy, and now, like a broken toy, she was flung aside and forgotten.

Craven had spoken truly; before the courtly grace and elegance of the women of his new sphere, Gaspard Leroy had found the mountain girl's beauty but a trifle, and day by day grew sick and tired of her presence.

As the carriage rolled on up the broad avenue, Richard sprang forward, shook off the horror which enchain'd him, and pursued it.

Away through the oaks it passed, on up a secluded road, then through the gates of a beautiful garden and up toward a mansion beyond.

He had tracked her to her hiding-place; it was the entrance to Leroydale.

He turned away with a shudder, then as the mail coach from the interior went whirling by, he saw on the box—Joe Wiston!

CHAPTER IX.

THE PEDDLERS.

The clock upon the mantel was striking nine, when Molly Maglone, the maid-of-all-work at Leroydale, closed the broad windows that opened out upon the gardens and drew the lace curtains into their proper position over the glass.

Within, all was brilliant and beautiful; without, the moonlight streamed down through the interlaced boughs of the oaks and lay like bars of silver along the road.

"Nine o'clock," muttered Molly, as the timepiece chimed forth the hour, "an' me wid the duster still in me hand. Shure, I might have known it whin I left Ne' Yark to come out to this devil-desarted Californy, jist fur the sake av bein' near me own swate Moike, who's diggin'-goold out in them big mountains beyant. Wurra, I was goin' ter be a big leddy loike missus, but he's diggin' these three year, an' divil a bit more does he make than'd kape hisself. But, faith, if bein' a leddy is to be miserable loike missis, sure, I'd sooner be plain Molly Maglone, for that drunken baste av a husband av hers is drivin' the swate craythur inty the grave, so he is, an' sure his brute av a brother an' them sarvints of his'n ain't ony better. That big chap, Lib, and the little feller, Poker—murder, there's a foine name for a man!"

"An' missus, poor, illegant craythur, she does nothin' but cry an' ax fur her owld father—wheriver he may be, I heard talkin' about it won night, an' I do believe Mr. Leroy would have struck her if it hadn't been for little Jessie. Och hone! but she's the plucky little jewel!"

At that moment a shrill, childish voice was heard screaming:

"How dare you take away my doll?" and the next instant little Jessie, flushed with passion, came into the room.

"What's the matter now, dearie?" asked Molly, patting the child on the head.

She looked up, passionate and wild, this spoiled child, and replied:

"Uncle Craven took away my dollie, and told me to go to bed. Molly, I hate him; he makes mama and papa quarrel, and I know he don't like either of them."

The child would have gone on in this strain for some time, but from the room beyond was heard the voice of her mother, calling:

"Jessie, dear, it is bed time!"

Then her face softened, and she ran away with a glad cry to meet her mother, the only being in this whole world the child really loved.

Nor was it strange, for she reminded her father of the mad match he had made, when now he would be free, and although he loved her in his queer way, he often repulsed her with blows, till the child shunned and feared him.

Molly Maglone stood for some moments watching the door of Sunlight's chamber after it had closed upon the child, then with a sigh she went on with her work.

The clock chimed the quarter hour, she threw aside her duster and was about to leave the room, when a knock at the window startled her, and she turned around to see an old woman with a basket of ribbons peering through the glass.

"Buy something, missie?" cried the old woman, lifting up a handful of gaudy streamers and allowing them to flutter in the air.

The girl shook her head sharply.

"No; be off wid yel" she cried. "What de ye mean peddlin' ribbons at this hour av the night? Go on, now!"

But the peddler did not appear in a hurry to leave, and returned in a whining voice:

"I've some pretty laces, lassie, and a dear little cap just fit for that lovely head. Look, it's dirt cheap! Just let me in!"

And as she spoke, the woman lifted up one of those dainty little trifles that women like to wear, all flowers and laces.

A long-drawn "oh-h" of delight issued from the Irish girl's lips and she weakened visibly.

"How much do you ax fur it?" she asked, edging up to the window and casting her eyes upon the gaudy trifle.

"Three bits, missie; cost ten, but I'm hungry and haven't eaten a morsel all day."

Three bits, it would scarcely have purchased the material, and glad at the chance for a bargain, the girl flung open the window and cried:

"Come in—come in! But don't make a bit av noise, for master would kill me if he knew I lit ony one in at noight."

"Not a trifle, missie," was the harsh-toned reply of the woman, as she fitted the cap upon the girl's flame colored head.

Molly was in ecstasies; she capered for a moment before the mirror, then dived down into her pocket and fished up the requisite sum.

"There!" she cried, "that's the last penny I have down-stairs!"

"Never mind, lassie, I'll wait while you run up," replied the woman, lifting a handful of ribbons and waving them before her eyes.

"Och, they're fit fur a quane!"

"Handkerchiefs, beads?" sang out a voice behind, and as Molly turned, an old man, leaning on a crutch, and having his eyes covered with a green shade, pushed back the window.

The girl was about to bid him begone, when the old woman looked up and said:

"It's my brother, missie; come in, Peter. He's blind, ma'am, but he has a lovely stock."

"Buy some beads, lass?" wailed the blind man, holding up a string of the glittering trifles.

Molly looked from the beads to the ribbons, and cried:

"Oh, they're lovely! What do you want for the lot, beads and ribbons? be quick! it's gettin' late, an' I must lock up the place."

"Two bits, miss, and you can have them both," hurriedly ejaculated the woman.

The offer was too good to refuse, and cautioning them not to stir till her return, the girl ran up-stairs. In an instant away flew baskets and hats, the man and the woman grasped hands, and cried at once:

"Joe!"

"Dick! Thank God I've found you!"

CHAPTER X.

ON THE THRESHOLD OF DARKER MISERIES.

YES, it was indeed Joe Wiston and Richard Delmayne, the "Forty-Niners."

"You received my letter?" asked Delmayne, instantly.

"Yes; or I shouldn't be here."

"Thank God! for I had to part with my mother's locket to send it and buy these wares. I saw you as you passed by on the mail-coach, and wrote you to come here in your present disguise. "Joe, my lad," and his voice quivered with emotion, "do you know where we stand?"

"No. Where?"

"Under the same roof with the woman I seek."

"Sunlight!" gasped the miner.

"Is here," was the bitter response; "here with Gaspard Leroy and her child—"

"Her child?"

"Yes; born three years before she fled with him!"

"Oh, the villain!" and the hardy old miner ground his teeth in rage.

"Ay, villain indeed, and I loved her so!" came back Delmayne's heart-broken reply.

"What are you goin' to do, Dick?"

"Save her!" was the quick response. "She is unhappy with this man—he ill-uses her—I love her, and stained as she is, I'll take her away from here as my wife! Hark!" he went on, snatching up his hat once more. "It is the Irish girl returning. Quick! You must slip back into the house—I will arrange all."

In a moment their disguises were readjusted, and quietly dropping a roll of ribbon on the floor, they awaited Molly's appearance.

They were not kept long.

"There's your money," she said, giving it to Richard; "now thin, good-night."

"Good-night, miss," returned the two men, passing up to the window.

Delmayne pushed it open, Molly saw Joe pass out, then Richard turned, and pointing to the roll of ribbon, said:

"I dropped some ribbon, missie; please pick it up for me?"

Without a single suspicion Molly did as she was bidden, and the moment her back was turned, Joe glided into the room and hid himself behind a sofa.

Molly gave Richard the ribbon—a moment more—then she saw him gliding down the avenue, and locking the window, left the room after extinguishing the light.

For an instant Joe did not dare to stir; then he arose softly, ran to window, and whistled.

A flutter was heard among the leaves, an answering call, and Richard Delmayne issued from the shrubbery and stepped into the room.

"Now, Dick, what's the game?"

"See Sunlight and—"

He stopped, a footstep was heard coming toward the parlors, and without a word, the two men hid themselves behind the furniture.

The sound came near, the door of Meg's chamber opened, and with her rich silk robes trailing after her, the "Sunlight of the Sierras" glided towards the window.

Ten o'clock!

She heard it strike and turned her eyes down the path to the gates.

"Ten o'clock," she repeated, as the last echo died out, "and still

Gaspard comes not! He who told me so often that he loved me has forsaken me, and I am left alone to die, heart-broken, unmourned, disgraced in the eyes of the world——”

She stopped with a start; a hand fell upon her shoulder, and, as she wheeled sharply around, she was confronted by two men.

“Ah! who are you?” she shrieked, shrinking back among the curtains. “What do you want?”

Stepping into the full glare of the moonlight, Delmayne raised his hat.

“Hawley Briggs!” she cried, joyously. “And this man is——”

“Joe Wiston, at your service, mum.”

“Speak; tell me of my father. Is he living?”

“Yes,” was the 'Forty-Niner's icy reply.

“Thank God for that! But, Hawley, how came you here, and for what?”

“To save you!”

“Save me?”

“Yes, and take you home.”

“No——no, my place is here!”

He turned his dead white face towards her.

“With Gaspard Leroy, your betrayer?”

“No,” she repeated, proudly, “but with Gaspard Leroy, my husband. Bound by an oath, I dare not speak, but let this attest my truth;” and as she spoke she drew from her bosom her marriage certificate. “Look!” she said, “he made me his wife, in the sight of God, now I prove it in the sight of man!”

Richard Delmayne turned away with a sob.

“The last link is broken,” he moaned; “my heart is shattered!”

What more might have been said was cut short by a half-drunken voice, singing as it neared the parlors, and with a white, scared face, Meg begged them seek shelter.

“It is my husband!” she cried. “If he saw you here, his jealous rage would know no bounds.”

With a moan, Delmayne sank down behind the sofa.

A door was near at hand, Joe pushed it open and darted in.

Ah, fatal step, it was Meg's bed-chamber!

She saw him seek shelter, but it was too late to recall him; the opposite door swung open, and Gaspard Leroy, followed by his half-brother, entered the room.

White and shivering she stood there waiting for the first word.

It was spoken by Craven Leroy, and almost killed her:

“Gaspard, I tell you it is true. I swear I heard men's voices—your wife is not alone!”

CHAPTER XI.

DESERTED.

SUNLIGHT's heart gave one great bound as Craven Leroy uttered those words, then fell heavily, and she remained there in the full, rich light of the moon, silent, motionless as a block of marble; for now he could see “through a glass darkly,” the approaching end.

She felt this man was bent on ruining her, and knew that the chance for which he had been waiting had come at last, but with Spartan-like bravery, determined to fight it to the last, though her support now was but a hair's breadth.

Gaspard Leroy's brow was clouded.

“You hear what my brother says?” he asked, sternly, fixing his eyes upon Margaret.

“Yes,” was the almost husky response. “He is mistaken. Good-night,” and she moved towards the door of her chamber.

But Craven Leroy was not to be baffled thus.

“One moment, madam,” he said. “You may throw dust into my brother's eyes, but you cannot blind me so easily. Was there not a man here?”

With her foot upon the threshold of her own apartment, Sunlight turned and faced him.

“You grow impudent, sir,” she said, coldly. “I might bid your brother to beware of you!”

Craven Leroy's cadaverous face turned a sickly yellow, and a dark wreath wreathed his lips.

“You seem to be in a hurry to enter that room,” he said. “Let me enter first. Perhaps the person we seek may be concealed there.”

“Sir!”

“At all events, I will see!” and as he spoke the man ran towards her.

Placing herself firmly before the door, Meg waved him back.

“No, no, no!” she cried. “You must not enter this room!”

“You see?” insinuated Craven, turning to his half brother, and then again facing Margaret. “Let me pass!”

“No——no!” screamed the wretched woman. “Bid him be gone, Gaspard!”

“No!” was the strong response. “Your actions betray you. Let him enter.”

“He must not—in fact he must not!”

“We shall see!” cried Craven, seizing her by the wrists and endeavoring to tear her away.

Sunlight saw that her feeble strength was but as a passing gust before this man's brutality, and pushing him from her, she screamed:

“Fly, Joe, Joe!”

With a single bound Joe Wiston cleared the threshold, dashed open the window and sprang out.

Almost simultaneously there broke from the lips of the brothers as the 'Forty-Niner disappeared, the words:

“A man!”

Uttering a shriek of dismay, Meg flung herself at Gaspard's feet and clasped his knees.

“Oh, Gaspard, husband, hear me!” she screamed. “I will explain all. It is only a mistake—it is——”

“Our separation!” he cried, wrenching himself free and dashing her to the floor. “Quick, Craven, my child!”

“Oh, powers of mercy, no!” shrieked the wretched woman, crawling forward to her husband and endeavoring to stay him. “Gaspard—Gaspard, for the love of Heaven, listen to me! I am innocent, indeed—indeed I am!”

“Mama—Mama!” broke forth a childish voice above her shrieks, and the next instant Craven Leroy darted into view with the child in his arms.

The moment Meg saw the child, her little hands extended and her night dress fluttering in the air, she seemed like one driven frantic with despair, and springing to her feet she fought like a tiger to stay the abduction.

But it was all no use.

As she drew near Gaspard Leroy, the heartless wretch lifted his clenched hand and brought it down with a dull, heavy thud upon her upturned face.

She staggered, pressed her clasped hands over her eyes to stay the flow of the blood, then with the last fragment of her strength, sprang upon him again.

Once more the brutal fist was lifted, once more it descended upon her face, and with a last shriek of despair, the Sunlight of the Sierras fell crashing to the floor.

Clasping his hand over the child's mouth, Gaspard with his brother passed through the window, disappeared down the moonlit avenue, and the pioneer's daughter, lost, deserted, was left alone.

A figure glided from behind the sofa, lifted the poor, crushed head and said:

“And it was for him you left me! God forgive you, Gaspard Leroy, and pardon me for my sins, for when next we meet, I will repay these blows with your life! Oh, Margaret! Margaret! I would have cherished you so; love me a little, I will die for you!”

CHAPTER XII.

DEAD MAN'S GULCH IN THE HEART OF THE SIERRAS.

FOR some moments Richard Delmayne knelt there, holding the head of the woman he loved so madly, then he brushed away the bloodstains and kissed the livid marks made by the fist of her brutal husband.

It was the first time in all his life his lips had met hers, and he quivered from head to foot with the wild, idolatrous passion that swept over him.

A sound startled him, and as he turned, blushing like a girl, Joe Wiston pushed open the window and came to his side.

“Well,” he said, “have you learned anything, Joe?”

“Precious little, Dick, but it may turn out a heap. They have gone, takin' them ar savvints of theirs with them—Poker an' Big Lib. I was in the bushes as they went past, an' I just hearn 'em say:

'We'll take to the mountains, for her friends may try to git back the child.' Then they passed out into the oak road, an' I came here to tell you. Now, Dick, what air we to do?"

"Follow them; get back the child by all means, then Gaspard Leroy and me are in for a life fight. Meg, too, must accompany us, but not as she is. Be it my task to persuade her to adopt male attire and seek shelter in the heart of the Sierras."

"Dick, you're a trump. But why do you do all this yere for a woman yer can never have?"

"Why, because I love her. Mine is a passion that nothing can kill. She may spurn me, trample me under her feet, but I will bless her, battle for her, die for her!"

At this juncture Margaret opened her eyes.

"My child!" were the first words. Then, as the past dawned upon her, she burst into tears and moaned: "Oh, I remember, he has torn her from me!"

A white look, an awful sternness came over her face, and she sprang hurriedly to her feet.

"I will find her," she cried; "he has dashed the last fragment of love for him forever from my heart! To the world's end I will seek him to obtain my child—my Jessie. Come, there is no time to lose—come—come!"

Like a mad woman she dashed down the avenue of trees, followed by the two miners; then she passed beyond the gates, and her foot had pressed the soil of Leroydale for the last time in life.

July 17, 1856; exactly one week after the desertion of Meg by her brutal husband.

The scene: Dead Man's Gulch in the heart of the Sierras.

From a broad plateau, over which the peaks tower up into mist above, the gulch below breaks, and leaves a sheer descent of two hundred feet to the falls at the bottom of the ravine.

To the left there is a ruined hut, through the broken windows of which the moonlight streams in great silver bars; above, a shattered sluice allows the water to drop down with a chilling, monotonous splash upon the ruined wheel of the "crush," and rippling thence down the shiny surface of the rocks.

To the right, a rude bridge spans the narrower part of the chasm, and, near this, a fall of water goes dashing down into the depths below.

It seems as though the hand of God had blighted this unhallowed spot, for the trees that overhang the gulch are gray and blasted, and the grasses withered and dry.

On the summit of a rock from which a view of the surrounding country opens like a panorama to his gaze, Craven Leroy, in the guise of a miner, leans upon his gun and peers down the broken chasm from whence a winding road leads past the forks of Eldoranda and thence to the station at Truckee, whither Gaspard and Poker have gone to procure food and cover up all traces of their flight with the child.

"Ugh! what a Heaven-deserted spot it is," he muttered, drawing back [in] the shadow of a blighted tree. "The tall, gloomy peaks fill my soul with strange emotions, and my heart, bent on removing every obstacle from my path to fortune, almost fails me as I gaze down these ragged gulches. Yet in the past, when purity and love reigned within me, there was a sublimity, a grandeur about this spot now eternally lost in the mad passion for gain, for there is a dread, unhallowed necromancy of evil that turns all things sweetest and holiest to phantoms of horror and fright. 'Tis nigh upon the hour of Gaspard's return. Hark! what sound was that?"

Upon the stillness broke a sharp, shrill whistle—the signal—and moving forward into the full light of the morn, Craven attached his handkerchief to the barrel of his gun and waved it thrice around his head.

Another appeared above the bushes below, then Gaspard and Poker came into view and began ascending the bluffs.

Both were clad in the coarse, earth-soiled habiliments of miners, and beneath this rough exterior no one would have recognized the dainty heir of Leroydale, save one who was watching for just such a change.

Upon reaching the plateau, Gaspard ran forward and clasped the cold, clammy hand of his half-brother.

"You have faithfully kept the watch," he said. "Where is Jessie?"

"Inside with Lib. She refused to retire until your return. Have you brought the provisions?"

"Yes, Poker has them. Take them within, my man."

"O. K.," muttered Poker, shouldering the bag he had brought from Truckee and disappearing through the dilapidated door of the shanty.

The brothers were now alone, and placing his gun beside Craven's, against the rocks near the hut, Gaspard ran up the highest peak and swept his gaze over the surrounding country.

"What are you doing?" questioned Craven, watching his action with surprise.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Gaspard ran down the descent and approached him.

"Has any one been here?" he asked, in a low voice.

"Not a soul," was the whispered reply. "Why?"

"As I passed the forks of Eldoranda, half a mile down the road, a figure darted hurriedly through the cut and disappeared into the brushwood beyond. The figure was that of a man—a miner. I halted for a moment, then my quick ear caught the rumble of wheels and I turned in time to see a wagon dash down the flats in the full light of the moon, driven by the man I had seen, while another sat beside him. Craven, we must leave this place to-morrow night. Those two men were Hawley Briggs and Joe Wiston!"

"You are sure of that?"

"It is impossible to be mistaken. I could stake my life upon it!"

"Then you anticipate danger from their presence?"

"What could make me believe otherwise?" replied Gaspard, quickly.

"Then, in that case—"

"In that case I will fight to the last gasp!" was the hot rejoinder. "I will take the watch myself, and rather than they shall tear Jessie from me, with my own hands I will hurl her down yonder gulch! Look," he went on, wildly, seizing Craven by the arm and dragging him to the edge of the canyon. "Look! Do you see those rocks below there that look like pebbles in the path? They are thrice a man's height in reality; it is two hundred feet sheer fall to those. Do you think a human being once dashed from this plateau would ever again prove an obstacle in the path of others?"

Craven Leroy's face grew ghastly white, and a new light beamed in his eye.

"Come away—come away!" he cried, shrinking back from the edge of the precipice, "the sight chills my blood. Certain death lurks beyond the ragged edge of those overhanging boulders. One false step—only one—and you are food for the beasts and birds. Food for the beasts and birds," he went on, speaking to himself. "His words have awakened a new existence. Shall he, by chance, take that fatal step?"

"You were remarking?" put in Gaspard, overhearing the last words.

"Oh, nothing. Merely commenting on the scenery, that was all!" and fearful that his face would betray his plans, Craven passed through the door of the hut.

For some moments, Gaspard remained looking after him, odd emotions struggling for the mastery within his breast.

"Am I mad?" he muttered, suspiciously. "Did my ears deceive me? I fancied—pshaw! these threatening dangers fill me with cruel misgivings. Craven is devotion itself to my interests, and a single suspicion in his direction is worse than unkind. Ugh! what a tiresome night it is!" he went on, turning back to the edge of the gulch. "I wonder what those two men were lurking around here for? Can it be Margaret seeks to gain possession of our child?"

"Where is she to-night? Three years ago I should scarcely have dreamed of this bitter sequel to my tale of bliss. Three years ago! Ah! how apt man is to build himself castles that the rough contact of the world will dash to ruins in an hour!"

"Oh, you are there, are you?" cried a childish voice, and as Gaspard turned he saw his daughter at his elbow.

"Where is mama?" went on the child, her great, blue eyes looking up into his face. "You told me you would bring her back when you left this morning. Have you kept your word?"

"No," he said, stooping down to kiss her. "Not yet, my child."

But Jessie put up her hands and moved away.

"You cannot kiss me, papa, for you told me that lying lips were unfit to press."

"How my words recoil upon me," he muttered, turning a shade paler. "There, child, return to the house, the night air is not good for you," and taking her by the hand, he led her into the hut, where his brother was smoking in silence with the miners.

A ladder connected with a sort of loft above which was the child's apartments, and running to this, Jessie began to ascend.

Half way up, she paused, turned and said to her father:

"Good-night, I am going to bed, but I won't kiss you, papa, till you keep your word."

He turned away, half angrily, half sadly, and a moment after Jessie had disappeared into the loft above.

Moving forward to one of the windows, she pushed open the shutters, rusty with age and sustained by the dead vine which crept up the side of the hut, and allowed the moonlight to stream in.

Kneeling down upon the blanket which served for her bed, the little one clasped her hands, turned her closed eyes up to the sky, and said:

"Please, Heaven, look down upon my slumbers and bless me. Bid my guardian angel to protect me always when I am good. Direct the footsteps of my friends to this place and restore me to the arms of the mother who brought me up to love and trust in Thee!"

Then the little golden head sank down upon the blanket, her breathing became slow and regular—she slept!

Would that prayer be answered! We shall see.

A moment's death-like silence, a head appears above the jagged crest of the rocks beyond, then another, and an instant after two men are standing upon the plateau in the shadow of the bluffs.

They move forward a step, then another—now they are in the full light of the moon!

They are Joe Wiston and Richard Delmayne.

The prayer is answered!

CHAPTER XIII.

TO THE RESCUE.

"WELL, of all the bloomin' places," muttered Joe, "this 'ere's the bloomin'est!"

"Hush!" continued Delmayne, lifting his finger to impose silence. "Not a word above a whisper. It would betray us. You are sure the child is here?"

"Sure!" returned Joe, lowly; "sure? Sure as I am thar's as many nuggets in these durn'd ole peaks as ever came out of 'em!"

"There remains then but one course to pursue: To secure Jessie before Meg, in her despair, perils her safety by attempting it herself. Her present disguise serves well, and with a will such as she possesses, all dangers are nothing before this wild appeal of the mother's heart."

At this juncture, a voice down the canyon broke the silence, singing away in a maudlin tone:

"Hip 'ocray, we'll—hic—all git drunk,
All git drunk—hic—all git drunk,
Blind as a bat—hic—who cares fur that?
We'll—hic—all git drunk, 'ooray!"

"The devil!" muttered Delmayne. "It is some drunken beast coming up the road through the cleft. Quick! seek shelter!"

And without another word, they darted out of sight among the rocks.

But none too soon, for at that instant the door of the hut was flung open and Gaspard Leroy, looking pale as death and grasping a pistol in his hand, bounded out upon the plateau.

Nearer and nearer drew the sound, and then a miner, staggering beneath the load of whisky he bore, reeled upon the bridge spanning the chasm.

"Who are you?" cried Gaspard, hailing the man.

The miner looked up from beneath his slouch hat and replied:

"Waz zat ter you? Don't kick up—hic—a row coz a feller wants a drink er wazzer?" and unfastening a tin cup from his belt, he dipped it in the stream, drank a little and then came forward.

"Have some, pard?"

"No."

"Zat's all—hic—right! Don't make any d'frenc'e."

He was just about to pass when Gaspard clapped his hand upon his shoulder and repeated:

"Who are you?"

"My name's Snaffles—hic—just up from Truckee. Have er drink?"

"Let me see your face."

"Won't."

"Let me see your face!" and this time the muzzle of a pistol glared Snaffles straight in the eyes.

"All right—hic—me covey, when yer speaks like zat. Look!"

He lifted his hat as he spoke, smoothed down his beard and looked Gaspard squarely in the face.

"You may pass on. You are a stranger!"

"Thank—hic—yer fur narthin'," and the man reeled away a few paces. "Nice night—hic—aren't it?"

"Yes!" snapped Gaspard, turning his back and going up to the edge of the plateau.

The miner moved forward; Gaspard's back was still to him, and tilting the cup, he emptied the water down the barrels of both guns which stood at the side of the door.

"Hip, 'ooray; we'll all get drunk,
All git drunk—all git—hic—drunk,
Blind—hic—as a bat, who cares for that?
We'll hic—all—git drunk, 'ooray!"

Gradually the sound faded away in the distance, and Gaspard Leroy was left alone with the somber silence of Dead Man's Gulch.

"Curse that fellow," he muttered. "He has given me a start it will take hours to quiet down. I wish I could sleep, and yet I dare not. I know one thing, I'll be miles away from this spot to-morrow night."

And he was.

Taking his pipe from his pocket, he lit it and sat on the edge of the ravine, his feet dangling over the awful depths below, his back resting against a dead tree, and whiffed away in silence.

At that instant, Craven Leroy pushed open the door of the hut and saw him sitting there watching the lambent tongues of smoke as they curled up above him.

"Fate plays into my hands," he muttered, hoarsely, feeling for the knife in his belt, and slinking forward like a cat. "The hour for action draws on. A single blow and I am made forever!"

But if Gaspard Leroy was blind to his danger, other eyes were awake to it, for a face peered through the bushes near the hut, a body glided forward, seized the vines and began clambering up towards the sleeping child.

It was the drunken miner!

Reaching the ledge, he stepped into the room and shook Jessie.

"Who are you?" she cried, opening her eyes.

"Hush, miss, I'm a friend of your mother's. Don't speak a word, or they'll murder us both. Keep still and I'll have you safe in the twinkling of an eye!"

Then he bent down and tearing the blanket into strips, to lower the child from the window.

By this time, Craven Leroy had reached his brother.

The sheeny glitter of the blade pierces the air as it is raised, and then the man makes a mental tally of the mystic number of life—three.

"One—two—three!"

Gaspard Leroy turned and saw him.

CHAPTER XIV.

A USELESS CRIME.

GASPARD uttered a little shriek of horror as he saw his brother standing over him, knife in hand, and the momentary suspicion of his fidelity an hour ago, came back with treble violence.

"Craven!" he cried, "and armed!"

"Yes, Craven!" came back his half-brother's reply, fairly hissing as it issued from between his lips. "The man whom you have robbed, the man who, by a father's idle fancy, is to-night a penniless outcast from the arms of his family, but who to-morrow shall be the rightful heir to the Leroy gold. Too long have my plans resulted in bitterest failure, now the day, the hour has come, and the outcast drifts into wealth and affluence upon his brother's blood!"

And even as the last words ceased to be, the glittering blade descended to the haft in Gaspard's breast.

The sudden and powerful movement disturbed his equilibrium, and as he fell over the jagged edge of the ravine, his fingers closed around one of the branches of the overhanging tree, and dangled there in space, his white, upturned face glimmering in the moonlight, and the blood trickling from the ghastly wound in his breast—a wound which alone would have been sufficient to produce death.

"Mercy—mercy, Craven!" he gasped, as the treacherous branch began to crack beneath his weight.

"Mercy? No! My heart is dead to it!"

"Oh, do not stain your hands with your brother's blood! Mercy, for the love of Heaven!"

Stooping down, Craven raised a fragment of rock and poised it above the miserable man's head.

"Don't kill me—don't kill me!" Gaspard shrieked. "Give me time to pray. Let me live and half my fortune is yours!"

"All or none!" hissed Craven. "You offer me wealth, I give you death!"

And with the last word, the fragment of rock descended upon Gaspard's head.

Perhaps then he thought of how his fist had fallen upon Meg's face, for as he released his hold upon the tree and went circling over and over to the hideous depths below, his last words in life were:

"Margaret—forgive!"

A moment the words echo on the awful gloom, then there is a sickening thud and all that is mortal of the Leroydale heir lies in a mangled, shapeless mass of flesh and bone at the bottom of Dead Man's Gulch—now indeed worthy of its name.

For a moment, Craven, horrified at the hideousness of his own crime, leaned against the trunk of the tree and quivered like a leaf.

By this time the drunken miner had lowered Jessie to the earth, scrambled down the vines, and with the child in his arms was gliding off up the rocks.

The terror which overcame Craven Leroy was but of momentary duration. He saw that something must be done to blind his companions, and springing forward, he shrieked:

"Help—help!"

The door of the hut flew open and Poker and Big Lib bounded upon the plateau.

"What's the matter?"

"Quick—quick, my brother has fallen from the rocks into the gulch below. Come—come!"

He had turned to dart down the path to the bottom of the ravine, but at that moment, on the ruined bridge, in the full light of the moon, he caught sight of the man with Jessie in his arms.

"Who are you?" he shrieked, rolling back with a gasp of terror.

"And who are you, that for a moment thinks to stay me?" shouted back the miner. "The child is in my grasp, and the devil himself would fail to tear her from me now!"

Wild, infuriated, mad with rage, Craven motioned the men to seize the guns, and shouted:

"Fire upon him!"

Up flew the fire-arms, the triggers fell—click! there was no report—the water had done its work.

"Ha, ha! Craven Leroy, murderer, why do you not fire?" laughed back the miner. "Are your bullets no deadlier than your hate? Fire—fire, man!"

"On to him, seize him!" shrieked Leroy. "Fool! give me that child!"

Off went wig and whiskers, revealing the face of Margaret Leroy, and with her child clutched to her bosom, her golden hair rippling like a veil of sunlight over her shoulders, and the gleaming barrel of a pistol leveled at Craven's head, she cried, triumphantly:

"You come, and take her from her mother's arms!"

Then two bodies cleft the air; right and left went Poker and Big Lib, over the brink of the chasm beneath the well-delivered blows of Delmayne and Joe, and darting forward, they seized Meg, hurried her down the flats and into the wagon, and before Craven Leroy could recover from his stupor, he heard the rumble of the wheels, saw them sweep rapidly away, and knew Leroydale had slipped from his grasp forever!

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE SILVER SAND RAVINE.

The shifting scenes of life have moved again, and behold! the last act of the drama of human destiny lies spread open before us; and it is indeed a fitting close to such a panorama of darkness and despair as has drifted past Margaret Leroy's eyes.

The scarlet bars of a glorious sunset are piercing the gaunt, feathery-leaved boughs of the fir trees that overhang the Silver Sand Ravine, and in the doorway of the little cabin, buried in the piles of glittering sand, an aged man sits, with a Bible on his knee, while a woman who is knitting at his feet, sings, as the glistening needles fly in and out among the colored stitches, and clicks an accompaniment to her song:

"Winter weather, gloomy day,
Clouds that chase the sun away;
New sorrows fast succeed the past,
And every day is overcast.
But, hark! a bird is singing nigh,
There'll be sunshine by and by,
There'll be sunshine, golden sunshine,
Watch for the sunshine by and by."

It is an old song, but the words of promise bring a smile to the lips of Ambrose Gath, and he lays aside his book to listen to it.

"You are cheering me up, Kate," he said, "while your poor heart is sad. It is nearly a month since Joe left for Oakland, but like Richard and Meg, he is strangely silent. All these years I have been watching for them, but I have schooled my heart to —"

"Pee weep!"

The girl sprang to her feet.

"It is Joe's signal," she said, a deep blush dyeing her cheek. "See, sir—here he comes."

And sure enough he did.

The old man sprang to his feet, and before Joe could lay a hand on Kate, had grasped him by the shoulder and said, in a voice husky with emotion:

"Speak, for God's sake, man! Have you heard of her?"

"Wall, I calkilate I hev, an' as for Dick, here he comes down the hillside now."

Kate ran forward and flung herself into her brother's arms.

He received her with a kiss, and then went over to the old man, who trembled so much with apprehension that he could not walk.

"Parson," he said, "I told you I would not come back to the Sierras till I could do so without a stain upon my name. It is clear now—as clear as Margaret's, and here I am once more to shake the hands of the 'Forty-Niners, as honest man to honest man may do!"

"You—you said," faltered Gath, fearful that his ears had deceived him, "you said as clear as Meg's name. Richard, my boy, speak to me—tell me all. You found my child?"

"Yes—but not a fallen creature, but a wife. If you doubt my words, thar's the marriage certificate for you, and here—why, here's Sunlight herself to prove it!"

There was a gentle rustle among the trees, a figure clad in black with a little form at her heels, sped across the glittering sand and fell with a cry of delight upon the old man's heart.

"Father!"

"Meg!"

Reader, let us drop a veil, for the end is not yet, and the dark passages have not all been torn from the book of Sunlight's life.

When Craven Leroy beheld Margaret and the two miners sweeping across the flats beyond, he snatched one of the guns from the ground and leveled it at her.

In his ignorance, he fancied it had missed fire the first time, but would be of avail now; but here he was again doomed to disappointment, for the same performance was repeated, and the weapon refused to discharge.

At that moment he saw a little stream trickling from the muzzle, and flinging it from him, he stamped the ground in his fury and gave utterance to language that would have been sadly out of place in polite society.

"Maledictions!" he shrieked, "duped, ruined and destroyed! The guns have been watered!"

Of this fact the reader is already aware.

"Curse her, curse them all, curse everything," he foamed. "They shall not escape me so easily. All is lost but vengeance, but I will pursue Margaret till the hour when I can crush her through her child. Satan, hear me. To thee and thy infernal acts I dedicate the remainder of my life; aid me to find this woman in her new-born happiness, and blight me if I do not have the life of her brat, to destroy it!"

"Misery—misery! The curse of Cain is upon me, and the crime was useless!"

He covered his face with his hands as he spoke, and then ran across the bridge and disappeared in the darkness beyond.

The days and weeks drifted by; a month had passed, and not until September was near at hand, did the chance Craven Leroy was waiting for put in an appearance.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE QUICKEST MARRIAGE CEREMONY ON RECORD.

AND during this month what had fate done for our friends?

A week or so after Sunlight's return, Richard and Joe bought out a deserted claim with but very little hope of making anything, but luck played square into their hands—they struck a rich vein of gold, opened a sluice, and in three days were the richest men in the whole Sierra chain.

To Margaret there had gradually come a new feeling; her love for Gaspard was of the past now, and she began to find her heart warming towards Richard Delmayne in a manner which clearly proved the truth of the old adage: "Second love is best," whilst he—well, buoyed up by the knowledge that she was a widow and a charming one at that, he remained in the Sierras and hoped for the end.

It was drawing on to the close of a sultry afternoon, as she sat with Kate and Jessie at the door of the cabin listening to Joe Wiston's queer yarns, when Richard was seen coming down the hills.

Her face grew very red as he came forward and took her hands in his, and Joe winked knowingly at Kate and led her into the cabin.

"Don't start, Meg," he said, "but I have heard that Craven Leroy was near Truckee a couple of days ago, and the boys are after him. What his presence may mean I do not know, but he cannot harm you now. May I send Jessie away? I want to talk with you."

"Yes; if you like," she faltered.

"Jessie," he said, "you may gather some flowers on the hills, but don't go far."

The child sprang up, and with a little shout of glee, disappeared among the sand-crowned peaks.

"Margaret," he said, when they were alone, "I came here to-day to tell you I am going away."

"Going away!" she repeated, growing very white. "Where, Richard? Why?"

"Where, I do not know. Why, can you not guess? It is to be far away from you—far away from the memory of past dreams. Ah, Margaret, are you blind that you cannot see my folly? I have dared to look up at the sun, but it is too bright for me. I have dared—"

He stopped. Her face, red with blushes, was hung down, but she was moving slowly—slowly towards him.

"Go on—go on!" she murmured.

"I have dared to love above my station. It is useless to go on; Margaret, I love you! Shall I go or stay?"

She wheeled sharply around, fell upon his breast, and cried:

"Stay! I love you!"

Then, before another word could be spoken, there rang upon the air a wild, piercing shriek of fright.

"Gracious Heaven!" shrieked Meg, wrenching herself from Delmayne's arms, "it is Jessie!"

At this juncture there arose upon the hills beyond the sound of many voices, and attracted by the noise, Kate and Joe, followed by the parson, ran out from the cabin.

"My child—my child! she is in danger!" shrieked Meg. "Hark! do you not hear those shrieks? They are Jessie's! Save her, Richard, save her!"

Rushing up the peak, Delmayne peered down the dell beyond.

"Gracious Heaven!" he cried.

"What's the matter?" echoed Joe. "Speak, Dick—speak!"

"Hush, hide yourselves! Craven Leroy, with Jessie in his arms, is rushing up the road, pursued by the miners. Quick, begone! he has not seen us."

Instantly every form was hidden among the bluffs, then far down the road, Craven Leroy, with the screaming child in his arms, shot into view, followed by a horde of infuriated miners.

On—on he comes; he reaches the table-land, bounds on like mad across the cliffs, then he is face to face with Richard Delmayne.

With a single leap he has wrested the child free and tossed the man over to Joe.

A shout of glee goes up from the men in the distance who have seen all this, and Leroy falls on his knees and cries:

"Mercy!"

"You won't find any in this shop!" returned Joe. "Hark! do you hear that sound? It is the old 'Forty-Niners, with the devil in them, comin' down the peaks to string you up to the nearest tree for the murder of your brother. Kate, I swore I'd take the stain from your name and win yer, an' I'm goin' ter do it. Come hyar, parson; jine these hands. Now, marry these people afore the guests arrive at the weddin'. Make this the shortest ceremony ever heard tell on, for in five minutes this spinster will be a widder. Come, Craven Leroy, your hour is near; undo one crime while life is left yer."

Nearer and nearer came the men; Leroy grasped the hand of Kate and stood pale as ashes before the parson.

"Will you take this man for your wedded husband?"

"Yes."

A shout; the miners have reached the plateau and are rushing forward.

"Quick, quick!" cried Joe.

"Will you take this woman for your wedded wife?"

"Yes."

The men are twenty feet away—ten—five—three.

"I pronounce you man and wife!"

And as the last word was spoken, a noosed rope was flung around Craven Leroy's neck, and a minute after he was dangling in mid-air.

"Mine at last!" cried Joe, clasping the girl to his heart, "an' the man that says I didn't win yer fair, will have to eat his words or fight it out. Parson, you'll have a couple to marry hyar."

"And here, too, father!" smiled Delmayne, leading Margaret forward.

The old man opened his eyes.

"Why, Meg," he said, "you are in as much of a hurry for another husband as Kate here."

"That's because the first was a fancied love, and again like her's, the second is a real one."

"But there is still one question to decide," said Richard, winding his arm around Sunlight's waist.

"What is that?"

"The wedding tour. You shall settle that, Meg; shall it be Europe?"

"No."

"Shall it be New York?"

"No."

"Then where?"

"Where? Where first our love was born, where all the happy days of our lives have been spent—here, in the heart of the Sierras, among the 'FORTY-NINERS."

[THE END.]

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